

## A New Beginning for the Meduxnekeag

*By Helena Swiatek, NRCS District Conservationist, Houlton (Southern Aroostook)*

Like many large rivers in Maine, the South Branch of the Meduxnekeag River in Houlton was cleared, widened and blasted for log drives and ferry barges in the 1800's. What worked well for man, however, did not suit the abundant fish population. Rivers cleared of woody debris and rocks become deserts for fish habitat. Healthy streams have "structure." This means they have rocks that the water moves over and around adding oxygen to the water for the fish. Streams have fallen trees and logs along the banks creating cover for the fish to hide from predators. These structures also create speed in the channel which helps keep the water from heating up. This is also important since fish native to Northern Maine thrive in cold water. It was all this lost structure that a team of partners set out to repair the damage done years before.

In 2007, the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians (HBMI), with support from the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), began a study of nearby rivers with fluvial-geomorphologist John Field to determine what the Meduxnekeag should look like if it had not been altered. Armed with this information they approached the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) for assistance. After receiving funding through NRCS's Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) in 2011, HBMI further teamed up with Eastern Brook Trout Joint Venture and USFWS to obtain enough funds to complete stream restoration on over 2 miles of the Meduxnekeag. Construction was set to begin during the summer of 2013 but an exceedingly wet summer prevented construction. It wasn't until July of 2014 that the project actually began.

On July 21<sup>st</sup> 2014, all the partners and the contractor met on site for an opening ceremony led by Brenda Commander, Chief of HBMI. At the ceremony Chief Commander stressed the importance of the river to both the tribe and the surrounding community. Participants received a smudging and offered tobacco to the river as a blessing. Afterward many shared they had prayed for good weather for the next stage of the project.



Before



During

Everyone's prayers were answered by a calm and sunny two weeks on the river. John Field oversaw the daily construction with intermittent inspections by NRCS District Conservationist Helena Swiatek. At predetermined



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locations 24-inch trees were driven into the banks by an excavator and reinforced by 5-foot boulders. In other locations trees and rocks were buried into the channel. Temporary skidder bridges were used to access the stream and to prevent erosion to the streambanks. Any disturbed areas were seeded down and mulched immediately.

Today a stretch of the Meduxnekeag has been enhanced and restored for fish habitat. Now the river can begin reforming pools, riffles and more log traps as it meanders around the structures, with full restoration expected in 5 years. But anglers won't have to wait that long to see the benefits. Immediately after installation, fish and other wildlife were already seen congregating around the structures. The 2015 fishing season is anticipated to be the best yet. It's a new beginning for the Meduxnekeag thanks to the dedicated efforts of the HBMI, NRCS, partners and landowners.

